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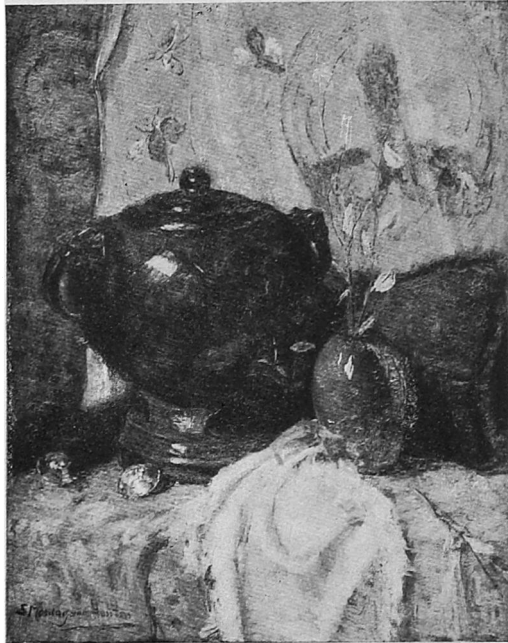
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THE ART OF MRS. S. MESDAG VAN HOUTEN

Few artists are so favored of fortune during their years of striving for public recognition that they are permitted to develop their art free from the cares and anxieties of personal lot. Indeed, among the favored few, so happily circumstanced, it is the exceptional man or woman who is able to maintain the ambition and devotion necessary for success. It seems to be a law of nature that, while abilities may be inherent, the development of these abilities is born of compulsion. Poverty, the need of success, underlies the glory of many of the world's towering geniuses in pictorial art; and, the more the pity, too often when the full measure of public recognition has been obtained, the mere sense of well-earned reputation acts as a deterring force, and induces apathy, indolence, or, what is even more deplorable, the carelessness that emanates from commercialism.

A marked exception to this rule is furnished by the life and career of Mrs. S. Mesdag van Houten, whose seventieth birthday was celebrated on the 23d of last December, at The Hague, by one of those pleasant festivals with which the Dutch people delight to honor their men and women who have attained distinction in the arts. Born in opulence in 1834, and married at an early age into a home where her every wish was granted, the sense of compulsion that has been the dynamic force in so many artistic careers was in her case wholly wanting. Until after she was thirty years of age it never entered her mind to study art, although she had always had a passionate fondness for every form of artistic production. Then she began a systematic course of study under



STILL LIFE

By Mrs. S. Mesdag van Houten

competent instructors, and devoted herself assiduously to her art, not as a fad or a pastime, as is so often the case with women of means, but with a determination not to screen herself from any of the drudgery incident to well-earned reputations, not to paint conventional landscapes by a fixed formula, nor equally conventional still-life pieces by rule, but to ground herself thoroughly in the principles of her chosen profession, and to get close to nature as an interpreter of nature's beauties and meanings. And it is safe to say that no artist



MRS. S. MESDAG VAN HOUTEN IN HER STUDIO
From a Photograph

who has attained equal eminence had a more protracted and disheartening struggle, one more likely to discourage devoted effort.

The incentive to this devoted life of art effort was doubtless her association with her gifted husband, the marine painter, H. W. Mesdag. It will be remembered that Mr. Mesdag himself began his art studies late in life. It seems to have been a case of man and wife, blest with all the luxuries that wealth can bestow, feeling the necessity of some purpose in life, other than the passing of days in easy indolence, and vying with each other in generous rivalry to realize a cherished ambition.

What measure of success was attained by Mesdag, America scarcely needs telling—an extensive collection of his paintings has

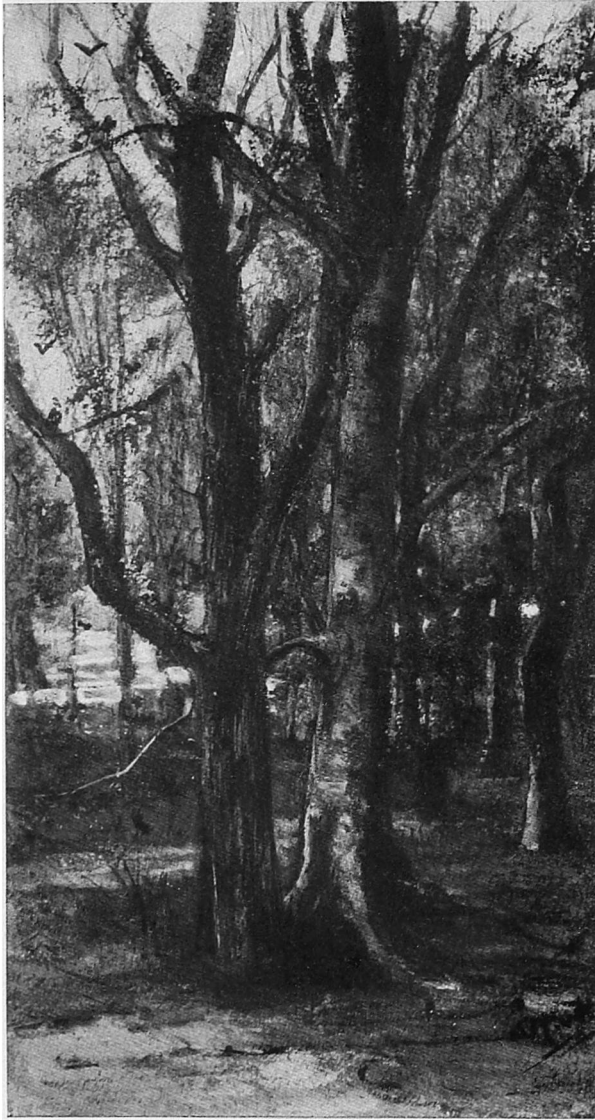
been exhibited in the leading cities of this country, and many of his strong marines are to be found in galleries on this side of the Atlantic. The work of Mrs. Mesdag van Houten, however, is scarcely known here, and it will surprise many of the readers of *BRUSH AND PENCIL* to hear that in Holland her art is ranked by many competent critics above that of her husband.

A word may here be said of her studies and of her methods; and it should be noted at the outset that breadth of knowledge and thoroughness as regards detail have ever been two of the most pronounced characteristics of the artist's work. It was her pleasant fortune during the early years of her married life to go to Oosterbeek, and later to Brussels, and to enjoy during her sojourn in these places the intimate friendship of many artists of note. Possibly it may have been this circumstance that suggested to her and to her gifted husband a life work of art. Be that as it may, she began, after she had turned her thirtieth year, a course of drawing lessons under D'Armand Gerken, a friend of her husband, at The Hague.

The start once made, she pursued her studies with indefatigable energy. She cultivated the acquaintance of artists whose example and success might serve as a stimulus to her own enthusiasm, never failing to lend a helping hand to others, as her means often permitted her to do, and never hesitating to admit her obligations in her art to others. By 1871 we find her painting in oil and working industriously in the open air. She started by sketching and painting the simplest things, preferably, at first, trees, shrubs, and the like, with an occasional essay at painting from a model. Then she began painting in oils, taking first her own dog, and finally devoting herself to landscape, when she felt that her attainments warranted her in doing so, and in later years especially, to still-life painting.

Broadly speaking, the years of the septuagenarian's serious artistic work have been devoted to two favorite classes of subjects—landscape, especially pictures of the dreary heath of her own country, and still-life, in which latter class of canvases she doubtless eclipses all the other artists of modern Holland. Some time ago a friend of hers, fully competent to speak from personal knowledge, described both these types of the artist's pictures; and I cannot do better here than to give the substance of her appreciative words. The poetry of the Drenthe heathlands, as Anna C. Croiset van der Kop has said, buoyed up Mrs. Mesdag in a marvelous way, making an indelible impression upon her—these immense heaths, away from civilization, one might almost say. She painted everything in a complete harmony, the man and his dwelling, the animal in his lair, the flat, far-reaching land, and the strange atmospheric effects of light and shade. She felt the charm of it all, she felt inspired by this sad isolated land, she knew it to be the realization of her ideal. It was poetry in line and color; it was a song without words.

Carefully she studied the soft undulating lines of the soil, and every peculiarity of the simple-minded people.



WOODLAND SCENE
By Mrs. S. Mesdag van Houten

All this close observation can be noticed in her later work, and her careful study of light and shade, of bright or dull skies against the rich color of the soil, shows the poetic, nature-loving soul of the persevering woman. When back in her own studio, and away from the dreamy heaths and moors, all these sketches were made into pictures, and undoubtedly some of them may be considered among her best.

For two or three years Drenthe remained for her, in the summer months, the point of attraction, where her impressions were renewed and refreshed. In later years, it was the Veluwe, with its endless heaths and commons, which captivated our artist—Putten, Benekon, Beek-huyzen, etc. Here she studied the

wonders of nature as closely as she had done in the province of Drenthe. Who does not know her waving fields of rye, her yellow haystacks



COSTUMES—REIGNS OF QUEEN ANNE AND GEORGE I. (1702-1725)
 From "Historic Dress in America"
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against azure skies, her harvest fields with the graceful bowing sheaves, the cottages with deeply thatched roofs slanting almost to the ground, with a small chimney craning out from some point, the old stained walls, the tiny door from which runs a neatly kept path of yellow sand? All these subjects have been produced and reproduced by her able and poetic brush. Then again we see one of the primitive dwellers of the soil standing out in distinct relief against a dull or rainy sky, through which streaks of silvery gray are trying to penetrate. Some-



FRUIT PIECE

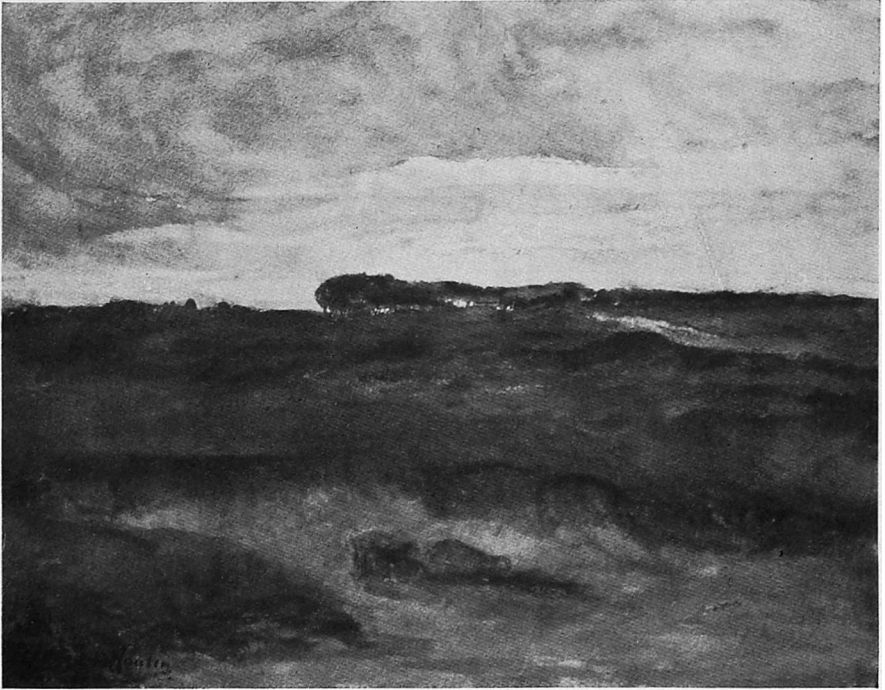
By Mrs. S. Mesdag van Houten

times she depicts the twilight, that mysterious moment when the dew falls and the land is enveloped in a soft gray veil, making the outlines indistinct, like the face of a bride behind her bridal-veil. Then again it is the moon which attracts her poetic fancy, casting her phantom light over the dark world. Often the artist varies the wonted features of her landscapes, but as a general rule she prefers painting her beloved heath-lands—stern, austere, even repellant, but beautiful under her brush. And it is her landscapes of this kind that will doubtless live.

As said before, her adoption of still-life subjects as the theme for finished pictures came comparatively late in her career, though from the first she had been addicted to this class of subjects. To her, as her friend has said, still-life, although not the first step on the road to

art, can nevertheless attain the highest points, and can represent the highest art idea. In all her pictures of this class she is absolutely faithful to fact, and at the same time she incorporates a certain marked beauty which results from her own good taste and selection.

Numerous are the works of still-life brought into being by Mrs. Mesdag at various periods of her career. If you look through her work, however, as her friend has pointed out, you will be struck by



SAND DUNES, HOLLAND
By Mrs. S. Mesdag van Houten

the difference between her early and late productions; yet at all times, the soft warm coloration meets the eye. Here, for instance, we see dark red apples, against a dark red background; there we see a white silk drapery, in beautiful harmony with a brown earthenware jar, filled with yellow immortelles; then again we are attracted by a bronze vase, with golden knobs, around which ornamental salamanders are entwined, depicted with spirit and taste, and, although called still-life, full of vivacity. On smaller panels we are met by the tasteful arrangement and modeling of Rozenburg-faience, and the well-known earthen pots made for holding burning peat and used for cooking and heating purposes, in this case holding yellow roses or

bright-colored tulips and anemones. It may all be called a unity of mysterious beauty, a wonderful harmony of exquisite lines and tones.

Particularly we notice a dark blue faience vase, into which a couple of peacock's feathers have been artistically thrown, against a warm background of old-gold leather. Then again we are astounded by seeing a very large blue Japanese vase, *cloisonné*, placed against the golden embroidery of a white silk curtain. Sometimes the artist



PEASANT'S COTTAGE, HOLLAND
By Mrs. S. Mesdag van Houten

takes a corner of nature and makes it into a subject for her favorite still-life—the trunk or the branch of a tree seen against a pure sky, or perhaps reflected in a pool of water, or else the roots seen above ground. But in whatever style, the picture always shows that the hand of the painter is guided by a thorough knowledge of her subject.

So far as Mrs. Mesdag is known in this country, she is known principally, perhaps, by her still-life paintings. They are certainly charming canvases, well conceived and beautifully executed. They show her best, doubtless, as a colorist, but after all, they are exemplifications of skill rather than of greatness, and so far as Mrs. Mesdag may be said to be great, she is great by her moorland interpretations.

Mrs. Mesdag and her husband became interested in the art of the French school when they went to Paris in 1867 to visit the great International Exhibition. The impression made upon them at that time was the genesis of the now famous Mesdag museum at The Hague. One after another, examples of the work of the great painters were purchased, and the Mesdag Gallery, which was lately given to the city for the benefit of its people, was formed. A notice like this of the life work of Mrs. Mesdag, who is adequately represented in many of the great galleries of Europe, would not be complete without giving her full credit for the part she took in the creation of this wonderful gallery of pictures, and of its bestowal upon the Dutch people.

BROES VAN RYN.



JUST LEMONS

By Mrs. S. Mesdag van Houten

NOTES ON THE ART EXHIBIT OF HOLLAND

The Holland painters are as keen in the study of landscape as in rendering upon canvas the quiet lives and homely surroundings of the people. Here again they do not look for the unusual, either in composition or color. They do not choose for subjects such as must seem untrue to that majority which is not trained to perceive extreme effects in nature, but rather they paint the landscape—and the seascape—in the “ordinary, every-day dress,” which we all know and can understand.

Only one thing it is necessary to remember in order to appreciate the Dutch landscapes—the normal atmosphere of the low-lying country is very heavy with moisture, the painting of which infuses a gray tone into the skies and a low color-key into the general prospect. It is not a good thing to base the impressions to be formed in the